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'Let us try to think of ourselves as a community'

John Dear | May. 6, 2008 On the Road to Peace

"The trouble with the Catholic Worker," Dorothy Day writes in her newly published diaries, The Duty of Delight, "is that one is so busy living that there is not time to write about it." She wrote a dozen books, nevertheless, and a monthly column for nearly five decades. Plus thousands of speeches and over a thousand pages of journal entries, which we can now read for the first time.

Her journals intimately tell her story, not just the heroic work of serving the homeless, resisting war and building community, but the day-to-day struggle to love, pray, work -- and above all, as they clung to bare survival, to trust God.

Unlike the literary journals of Thomas Merton -- polished and self-conscious -- Dorothy's are written on the run, amid exhaustion, noise, and chaos. Hers was no existence borne aloft on angels' wings. Hers was a life of fidelity in the midst of hunger and sickness and anguish and death.

We read of her lifelong devotion and never-ending worry for her daughter Tamar and, later, for Tamar's nine children -- and even for Forster, the common-law husband who, after she accepted baptism, packed up and left. The book bulges with the names of the great and famous, the small and faithful, sinners and saints. Details stand out, like the day she turned down five honorary degrees, including Georgetown, Marquette, and Brown.

We read how every time she returned to New York after touring Catholic Worker houses elsewhere, the constant refrain was: "You're never here!"

Shining through is her fierce focus on essentials -- daily Mass, regular confession, spiritual reading, serving the homeless poor, studying the issues, and fending off the government, the police, the IRS, and the New York archdiocese. Throughout her life, these journals show, she maintained a deep inner, spiritual struggle -- against judging others, against anger, despair, hostility, failure.

Her diaries open a new door to those struggles and the spiritual disciplines she used, always with a view toward orienting her heart toward kindness. For example, in 1936, she wrote out her personal monastic "rule":

> Morning prayers in my room before going to Mass. Around the middle of the day to take?fifteen

minutes of absolute quiet, thinking about God and talking to God. One visit to the Blessed Sacrament during the day always without fail. The rosary daily. Plenty of spiritual reading to refresh and encourage myself. The thing to remember is not to read so much or talk so much about God, but to talk to God. To practice the presence of God. To be gentle and charitable in thought, word and deed.

This week *NCR* features a fine review of Dorothy's diaries [1], so I don't want to review the book. Rather, I thought I'd post some of the entries to let Dorothy speak for herself, because reading this book is like spending days listening to her voice. May these sharings encourage you to read the book, and even more, to carry on a similar Gospel journey.

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Feb. 19, 1935. As I sit, I am weeping. I have been torn recently by people, by things that happen. Surely we here in our community are made up of poor lost ones, the abandoned ones, the sick, the crazed and the solitary human beings whom Christ so loved and in whom I see, with a terrible anguish, the body of this death? I have seen too much of suffering recently.

June 29, 1938. Meditation on the bus to Harrisburg. Thinking gloomily of the sins and shortcomings of others, it suddenly came to me to remember my own offenses, just as heinous as those of others. If I concern myself with my own sins and lament them, if I remember my own failures and lapses, I will not be resentful of others. This was most cheering and lifted the load of gloom from my mind. It makes one unhappy to judge people and happy to love them.

July 17, 1938. My problem is not to become upset at people's discontent and criticism but to keep myself peaceful, kind and patient. My great fault when one person is criticizing another to me is to point out their faults and that only makes things worse.

Sept. 10, 1938. Where are the priests for the poor, the down and out, the sick in city hospitals, in jails? It is the little ones among God's children who do not get cared for. God help them and God help the priest who is caught in the bourgeois system and cannot get out.

Sept. 24, 1939. To love to be with the poor is of course hard. Dirt, inefficiency, dullness, lack of taste, beauty, culture -- all these are a part of poverty.

Dec. 4, 1939. The year has been hard. Many speaking engagements, finishing "House of Hospitality," at least a thousand letters and hundreds of speaking engagements; sickness and deaths in the house; the death of my father; the day by day work at Mott Street and the farm; what care I can give a thirteen year old child. All these occupations and works have indeed worn me down, so that it is good to rest quietly and read and write and meditate.

April 1, 1940. Living as we are in a time of emergency, thrown together in a companionship with others of different races and creeds, let us try to think of ourselves as a community. Let us live in peace, and then we are a little oasis of peace in a war-torn world. Let us have no bitterness, no class strife, so that we can build up our strength to work for justice and love. Let us pray together, no matter what our faith is, for each other and for the whole world.

Dec. 17, 1948. Oh to be zealous for God, to love God, praise God, make God more loved!

Jan. 1, 1954. Wars today involve total destruction, obliteration bombing, killing of the innocent, the use of atom and hydrogen bombs. When one is drafted for such war, when one registers for a draft for such a war, when one pays income tax, 80% of which goes to support such war, or works where armaments are made for such war, one is assenting to take the steps toward war. War involves hatred and fear. Love casts out fare. We must work "to make that kind of society where it is easier for people to be good."

June 20, 1956. I know that war is evil and there is no such thing as an armed peace. So I must oppose war and all that makes for war even if it goes against duly constituted authority.

Dec. 27, 1959. In the CW there are so many, and each one wants it all, your time, your love, your attention. "You are never here," [they say] This is my suffering, my failure, and my cross.

Feb. 24, 1960. Today I thought of a title for my book, "The Duty of Delight," as a sequel to "The Long Loneliness." I was thinking, how as one gets older, we are tempted to sadness, knowing life as it is here on earth, the suffering, the Cross. And how we must overcome it daily, growing in love, and the joy which goes with loving.

Feb. 26, 1960. My heart is wrung by the suffering in the world and I do so little. There was a picture in *Newsweek* of a dozen starving babies in the Congo, one tiny little one with his face in his hands. Terribly, terribly moving. The only consolation is that God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. But woe to us who caused those tears. We white ones.

Sept. 17, 1961. No matter how broke we are, people do not stop coming, nor do they go away. Sometimes, I feel like saying, "Those who don't have to be here, please go away." But they would just look helpless and say "Where else shall we go?" Fernando says, "No one ever loved me." I hear that many times a month and feel like saying, "Where there is no love, put love." We all need to learn that. Of course sometimes it is hard to love people. Fr. Hugo said you love God as much as the one you love the least. So all our life is a practice to learn to love God.

Sept. 2, 1962. It is good to sit out here in early morning and think and pray about my coming visit

to Cuba. To me, the issue is always that of nonviolence, as well as humanity's needs on this earth where God put us to work out our salvation.

Jan 14, 1965. Priests lead too sedentary lives and their study is too one-sided. If we only had a few revolutionaries among them, more who study deeply the problems of our times.

May 18, 1965. More and more one is driven to accept the Little Way of St. Therese of Lisieux. Silence, quiet, peace, acceptance. One has such a constant sense of failure, uselessness, inability to cope. Then at night, remembered to accept the suffering as work, as spiritual weapons. Charles de Foucauld and St. Therese both made so much of "littleness," the "least place," which no one can take from.

Jan. 6, 1967. Wept all morning over the state of the world and the house.

Dec. 28, 1967. To me the cult of the saints is most fascinating study -- the beauty of holiness shines out through them and illumines history. One feels their influence still, in the memory of them, in the places where they lived. They have much to teach us with their patience, endurance, hard work.

April 14, 1968. The sun has risen, the air is warmed, the birds are singing and I go outside to sit by the river, which flows by, the tide carrying bits of driftwood, the only thing indicative of motion, of progress toward the sea. And from quiet terror, I go on to quiet joy at God's goodness and love in giving us Jesus to show us how to love. The testimony of our hearts shows us the truth. We experience, no matter how briefly, the sense of salvation He won for us. Assassinations, wars, the lying and treachery of humanity, even the best, what with our capacity for evil, fades out in such blinding flashes of light.

Oct. 1, 1969. To me, nonviolence is the all-important problem or virtue to be nourished and studied and cultivated.

July 21, 1971. No matter how old I get, no matter how feeble, short of breath, incapable of walking more than a few blocks, what with heart murmurs, heart failures, emphysema, arthritis in feet and knees, with all these symptoms of age and decrepitude, my heart can still leap for joy as I read and suddenly assent to some great truth enunciated by some great mind and heart.

April 27, 1973. To be is good. I am grateful for life, to be in this world, frightful though it is today with wars spreading and expanding --Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand. Mad and senseless, and seemingly headed toward catastrophe with Nixon as president -- drunk with power, with no knowledge of fundamental Christianity in spite of religious services in the White House. But we are more and more becoming world conscious, conscious of our humanity. Young people are studying more and more about religion.

> **June 19, 1973.** We feel so powerless. We do so little, giving out soup. But at least we are facing problems daily. Hunger, homelessness, greed, loneliness. The greatest concern of the Bible is injustice, bloodshed. So we share what we have, we work for peace.

And an undated entry:

> It seems to me that one of the happiest lessons in the gospel is that of love. We are told to love one another and to show that love by giving. And that love becomes more like that of God when we see Jesus Himself in those around us, as the apostles did? He taught them about love, about loving. The prodigal son, the sick, the lepers, the privileged, the tax-gatherers, the sinners, those in prison--in other words, loving the unlovable. Love is the reason for it all

The Duty of Delight is available from Marquette University Press (or **amazon.com [2]**). Next week on May 17, John Dear will facilitate "Becoming People of Peace," a Pax Christi Assembly in Santa Fe, N.M. See: **www.paxchristinewmexico.org [3]**. His forthcoming autobiography, *A Persistent Peace* is available from **www.persistentpeace.com [4]**. For further information about his writings and speaking schedule, see: **www.johndear.org [5]**.

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